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ARCHIVES AND THE HISTORIAN

F. H. ROGERS

It was the Wellington Conference of 1950 which included an Archives Seminar; possibly the first meeting of New Zealand librarians ever gathered together for such a purpose. In the next annual conference at Palmerston North an evening session was devoted to archives and, as a result, Council was asked to set up an Archives Committee. In succeeding conferences in Timaru, Auckland and Nelson, there have been seminars where the faithful few have gathered to discuss ways and means for the better preservation of archives in New Zealand. Now in Wanganui, in this session, archives, or words in manuscript, are being considered in conjunction with books. This is as it should be, since together they constitute the materials for the historian.

Even if we look at archives and printed matter outside this Conference Session the association of these two types of records is an important one. I have always advocated that a separation of these two media is highly undesirable. That does not imply that librarians are the proper people to look after archives. But it is possible that in New Zealand where archivists are few, and are likely to be for some

Mr. Rogers gave this address at the general session of the 1955 Conference on the Provision of Material for the Historian.

time, librarians may find it necessary to assume this added responsibility, and thus obliged to acquire new techniques for that purpose.

IMPROVED STATUS OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

In this short paper I propose to give brief mention to the Government or National Archives, and then consider Local Archives, the various activities of your Archives Committee, and means whereby we can help the historian in this matter.

When the National Archives was known as the Dominion Archives it existed, I can hardly say lived, in some of the attics above the General Assembly Library. This accommodation was one of the most depressing slums of its kind I have ever seen. It was here that much of our priceless, irreplaceable records were housed in conditions every bit as bad, if not worse than those which obtain at the Headquarters of the National Library Service.

With very few exceptions our representatives in Parliament have failed to concern themselves with the preservation of our national records. Ironically, it was the Hope Gibbons fire which helped to remind people that all was not well with our national archives. For although this fire destroyed a large quantity of priceless records and damaged many more, its heat generated wrath in certain New Zealand historians, and it produced protests from the New Zealand Library Association. It even shocked some of the more normal members of the population.

There may have been no connection between the fire and the moving of the National Archives to a better place, but the fact remains that the archives staff and some of the records are now housed under much better conditions in the Employers' Federation Building, Wellington. Moreover, in spite of the severe difficulties under which the staff has worked in the past, it is to be congratulated on the admirable 'Guide to the Dominion Archives' published in 1953 and the institution of a series of preliminary inventories to the collections.¹ Even so, there is still much to be done, although we can be encouraged by the fact that the Government has announced its intention to appoint a Government Archivist. After that, an Archives Act can only be a matter of time.

Thus it is possible to see, at least in part, the future development of the National Archives, and I think that we, in the New Zealand Library Association, can claim some credit for this most welcome improvement in the status of the National Archives during recent years.

THE ARCHIVES COMMITTEE AND LOCAL RECORDS

When considering local Archives it would seem appropriate to include a brief resumé of the activities of the Archives Committee. With one exception, the original Committee consisted of Librarians and the

¹ 1 - 4 are published; 5 - 6 are in preparation.

Officer in Charge of the Dominion (now National) Archives. Later it was felt that the committee would benefit if some local authority official, not necessarily a member of the New Zealand Library Association, could be persuaded to take membership. In this way Mr. J. C. Lucas, the Dunedin City Town Clerk, was added to our Committee. His role is to pass on to the Municipal Association and the Town Clerks' Institute information relating to our activities in the field of local archives. The New Zealand Counties Association has also approved of our project, and each county clerk has been asked by their association to help us in every way. At this stage it was decided to attempt to obtain Government approval for our survey. The reply from the Department of Internal Affairs is important since it indicates a pattern of approved repositories distributed throughout the country.

'Another thought that occurs to me is the desirability of having one records centre in the principal towns, wherever it is decided that records shall be deposited. Again, although this Department is not concerned with the central depositing of local body records, it is recognized that for practical purposes the concentration of both governmental and local body material should best be at one point.

'Now that Cabinet approval has been given to further steps being taken with regard to Government Archives, it is probable that definite attention will be paid to local depositories in the near future, and a certain amount of consultation between the Library Association Committee and this Department will be desirable.'

Three important points emerge from this letter. First, it is recognized that government archives should be, in some measure, decentralized and be located in the principal towns. Second, the Department would like to see a concentration of both government and local records in such records centres, and third, the New Zealand Library Association will be consulted when the question of local depositories is under consideration.

In addition to this letter, the Secretary for the Department of Internal affairs was good enough to arrange for a further letter to be sent out to all local authorities. It is worth quoting in full, for it commends to all local authorities the work of our Association in the archives field and indicates an official interest in the preservation of records which should be a most welcome assurance for all interested parties and bodes well for the future.

20th October, 1954.

The Clerk or Secretary,
All Local Authorities.

LOCAL BODY ARCHIVES

The New Zealand Library Association is keenly interested in the preservation of archives, and to this end has set up an Archives Committee to inquire into the need to preserve documents and the

methods of collection and preservation. The Committee's main project at present is a survey of local records of the country. In furtherance of this project the various branches of the Association together with the Archives Committee are attempting to survey the records of local authorities. So far as possible this is being done by personal visits to each individual local authority.

This Department commends to all local authorities the work being done by the Association in surveying their records.

The object of this survey is to discover which of the records that local authorities have accumulated (such as minutes, correspondence, etc.) are valuable for research. Many of the records that local authorities accumulate in the normal course of their activities for their own administration, legal, or fiscal purposes come to possess, in the course of time, values for research purposes. They may document the beginnings and development of communities and the growth of local government, they may reflect significant trends in the economic and social progress of communities, or they may contain information on many fields of local activity, such as communications, transport, public utilities, agriculture, or industries. Such records are valuable not only because of the light they may throw on such topics but also because they are often unique and contain information that is not available elsewhere. These records may have lost or may be about to lose their original usefulness to the local authorities that accumulated them, but it is in the public interest to preserve those that possess or that have come through the course of time to possess values for research.

The aim of the New Zealand Library Association is to try to ensure the preservation of such records and to make them available to research workers in cases where it is proper to do so. In some cases this will involve the deposit of these records under mutually agreeable conditions in approved institutions, such as libraries and museums.

This Department fully approves of these aims and strongly recommends local authorities to co-operate to the fullest extent with the New Zealand Library Association in this work, and to refrain from destroying records that may possess values for research purposes. Any enquiries on this subject may be addressed to this Department or to the convener of the Archives Committee of the New Zealand Library Association, Mr. F. H. Rogers, Librarian, University of Otago, Dunedin.

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) A. G. HARPER,

Secretary for Internal Affairs.

Branches of the New Zealand Library Association still engaged in the survey of local records should be encouraged by this letter, knowing that they can make reference to it when attempting to enlist the co-operation of local authorities.

GUIDE TO ARCHIVES PRACTICE

In order to offer a further service to people in need of help concerning archives, the Archives Committee has almost completed a *Guide to Archives Practice*. The first part of this work considers the meaning of archives, followed by descriptions of organizations, national, local, semi-public and private which are likely to produce records. There is a chapter devoted to the retirement of records, and another to cataloguing, calendaring and classification of records. A further chapter on the care and repair is followed by a list of archival terms and a select bibliography. It is not intended to publish this work, but to have a certain number of copies prepared and placed in the hands of a limited number of suitable people who will become archives consultants and create an advice service for those who seek information concerning the care of records.

During the Wanganui Conference several people asked for a definition of archives. Definitions do exist although archives are not easy to define. Perhaps the classic definition is supplied by Sir Hilary Jenkinson² who stated that,

'A document which may be said to belong to the class of archives is one which was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which it itself formed a part; and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.'

It would be difficult to deny that such a definition provides strict limitation of scope, is cumbersome and, at least at first sight, is not easy to understand. When Dr. T. R. Schellenberg, Director of Archival Management in the United States National Archives and Records Service was in New Zealand in 1954, he made no secret of the fact that he felt that the modern archivist has need to re-define the meaning of the word 'archives' in a manner more suited to his needs. He suggested that definitions accepted hitherto and propounded by European archivists have reference chiefly, if not entirely, to ancient archives. His definition of Archives is,

'Those records of any public or private institution which are adjudged worthy of permanent preservation for reference or research purposes and which have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution.'

In point of fact there is not so much difference between the English and American definitions. The latter definition is more concise and is different in so far that it places the responsibility for determining which records are worth permanent preservation with the archivist, who must employ a policy of selection.

The definition attempted in our *Guide to Archive Practice* avoids all reference to selection. This was deliberate since it was felt that

² Hilary Jenkinson, 'A manual of archive administration'; new and rev. ed., 1937.

we were dealing with people relatively unused to archives, and if the importance of the subject could be conveyed, much would be accomplished which might otherwise be lost if any attempt was made to introduce the somewhat contentious subject of archive selection.³ And so in the Introductory chapter of our *Guide* it is stated that,

'By Archives are to be understood all those writings which accumulate naturally during the conduct of affairs of any kind. Their distinguishing qualities are their natural "accumulation," their preservation in custody and their relation to each other and to the business which produced them.'

It is necessary to appreciate that archive quality does not depend upon age. Ordinary office papers of today are archives of tomorrow, and they all require a like consideration and adequate protection should they merit preservation. The chief difficulty about records is that, unlike books, they begin as one thing and end up as another. They start as 'documents created in the transaction of business,' and they end, or should end, as potential sources of New Zealand history. These stages may, and often do, overlap, while in other cases there is a long time lag between them when the value of the records for current business has gone and their value as historical material has not emerged. Naturally this is a very dangerous period when much destruction takes place — a time when unique historical material may be lost forever.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR PRESERVATION

It is obvious that the records of the Central Government should be kept and conserved under statute. There are also encouraging indications that some Local Authorities are already depositing their records in libraries and museums. It is perhaps appropriate to emphasize at this point, that authorities should be urged to deposit their records only in institutions that are publicly administered and are permanent.

When semi-public records, e.g., those of statutory and chartered bodies, endowed institutions, public utility organizations, etc., pass out of the custody of the body to which they belong, they do so, naturally, at the discretion of such body or its executors. The same applies to private records, correspondence, family papers, business and professional records. In these matters, and in the absence of a generally accepted code for the guidance of owners and custodians of archive groups of any of the kinds mentioned above who may desire to deposit them in some public repository, there may be, in the future, some conflict of interests between repositories.

This kind of potential conflict is a matter for amicable settlement between the parties concerned, but in the event of there being estab-

³ It is intended to cope with selection policy by issuing Bulletins dealing with selection and disposal of records.

lished by law a national archives authority, this body might properly act as arbitrator. One guiding principle, however, may be affirmed, and it is that organically grown archive groups should never be broken up, least of all to satisfy the claims of local ambition. It must be remembered that the indiscriminate splitting up of archive groups for the benefit of local collections means obscuring the evidence of former administration. When accepting material, the authority taking over must be prepared to take over *en bloc*; there must never be selection of 'pretty' specimens (i.e., the attractive signature, or letter written by a local worthy). This leads to the observation that archives are *not* museum objects, and a custodian of records is *not* and must *never* be a collector of specimens, however interesting in themselves they may be.

DUTIES OF AN ARCHIVIST

The archivist is an official appointed as custodian and administrator of archives. His first duty is, besides that to the authority which he serves, to the records entrusted to his care. On him is the onus of seeing that they are properly housed, preserved, and calendared or catalogued. If he be in charge of an institution to which the public has a right of access, he has a further duty to make the records accessible to students and to the public generally, under suitable arrangements for safeguarding them. The archivist is not appointed to extract his records for the sole purpose of writing historical monographs based upon their study. It is, therefore, not essential that he should be an historian. A good knowledge of history, national and local, and particularly administrative, is a valuable qualification, but a history degree, coupled with a 'love of ancient papers' does not make an archivist. In addition to his particular routine duties, it is his further interest to promote, in every way he can, the preservation of archives generally. Moreover, it must be remembered that the conditions suggested above are not peculiar to archivists but concern those librarians who are interested in archives to the extent of the possible establishment of an archives department under their control.

Finally, the interests of archival science, and those of professional scholarship, can be enormously furthered by readiness to impart and exchange the lessons of professional experience. This is a principal medium by which a system of professional education can be built up, a corpus of experience accumulated, and the wider interests of historical scholarship promoted.

INFORMATION REQUESTED

MEMBERS of the Association are asked to send bibliographical data of books concerning Hungary, Finland and Estonia which are available in New Zealand libraries to Mr. K. J. Hesz, P.O. Box 666, Wellington.